

# **Stories of Innovation in Oncology Social Work**

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## **Statement of the Research Problem**

There is an increasing body of knowledge about professionals in the field of psychosocial oncology and the impact on them of their close proximity to illness and death in their workloads (Beemsterboer & Baum, 1984; Bruning, 2002; Davidson & Clarke, 1990; Dollinger et al, 1997; Eyre et al, 2002; Hill, 1989; Hill, 1991; Holland, 1998; Holland & Rowland, 1989; Holland & Lewis, 2000; Jevne, 1987; Klagsbrun, 1983; Kubler-Ross, 1969 ; Lauria et al, 2001 ; Lewis, 1980 ; Mullan, 1983; Nouwen, 1979; Peteet et al 1989; Pope, 1991; Prichard, 1998; Schnipper, 2003; Sontag, 1979; Tolstoy, 1886; Trillin, 1981; Vachon, 1987; Weisman, 1979; Ziska & Fox, 1983). In contradistinction to recurrent themes of stress and burnout is the need for creativity and innovation in oncology social work practice. Oncology social workers frequently confront death and dying and existential despair in their work with chronically and terminally ill cancer patients. They are constantly confronted with complex and profound human problems which require creative problem solving and innovative interventions. No research has been conducted which examines the process and the factors that affect practitioner innovation in oncology social work. This research problem is the focus of this doctoral dissertation and informed the methodology utilized. Based on an extensive literature review and the need to better understand the phenomena of innovation (Boehm, 1961; Drucker, 1985; Drucker, 1985; Gelfand, 1988; Gummer, 1986; Heus & Pinchus, 1986; Hitt, 1975; Kantor, 1984; Mars, 1971; Messner, 2004; Morgan, 1986; Pawlak, 1976; Peters & Waterman, 1982; Rapoport, 1968; Schon, 1987; Thomas, 1988; Weissman, 1990) in oncology social work practice, an exploratory study was undertaken to discover the factors which influence innovation in this field of social work practice.

## **Research Background and Hypotheses**

This dissertation is an exploratory study which was undertaken to identify the conditions which enhance practitioner innovation in oncology social work. For the purpose of the study, innovation is described as the trying of something new or different in one's oncology social work practice. Since there is no published research to date on

this topic in oncology social work, the study is exploratory. Fifty-seven oncology social workers from four leading cancer institutions in the United States volunteered to be interviewed. The sampling method utilized was non-probability, purposive sampling techniques. The sample bias in favor of more innovative settings and practitioners is reflective of the investigator's attempt to discover what factors influenced them to innovate. By studying the perceptions and experiences of these innovative oncology social workers, it may then be possible to identify those contextual factors that influence innovation.

## **Methodology**

The primary source for data collection for this study was open-ended, semi-structured, focused interviews with the staff at the four sites, who volunteered to participate in the study. In order to best capture the subject's first hand experiences, the investigator interviewed each study participant on site in their own natural real life work surroundings. The study was developed in accordance with research guidelines to protect the rights of the institution and staff by making participation in the study voluntary, assuring the participants of and maintaining confidentiality and anonymity in data analysis, use and reporting. An open-ended interview format was selected rather than hand written questionnaires because interviews provide an opportunity to collect rich qualitative data. There were seven-closed ended demographic questions and eight semi-structured, open-ended questions which provide the descriptive data of the study. These questions served to focus the interviews and the investigator utilized probes to encourage the respondents to expand upon their responses. A total of fifty-seven oncology social workers were interviewed from the four study sites.

With the permission of the study participants, all the interviews were tape-recorded. The investigator took brief notes during each interview. Each interview was fully transcribed from the beginning of the interview to the end of the interview, including "doorknob" remarks. The interviews were transcribed and coded into categories by the author using grounded theory approach to data analysis. The author reviewed on numerous occasions all of the transcriptions, as well as the live-taped interviews. Repeated review of all the transcribed interviews led to the investigator's construction of a coding system of major categorical responses to the study's open-ended questions. Since the investigator constructed the coding system and coded the responses, intra-coder reliability was tested by the investigator coding the same interview on multiple occasions. Data analysis techniques proposed by Strauss and Corbin (1990), Miles & Huberman (1984 & 1994), Glaser & Strauss (1967) and Patton (1990) were rigorously followed. To sum up, methodology and analysis of the data for this study was a rigorous, challenging and creative process. Analysis involved diligent and systematic coding of the data and the use of exemplar citations from the taped interviews for illustration.

The researcher in this study of the phenomenon of innovation in oncology social work practice engaged in heuristic inquiry as well as phenomenological inquiry, since the researcher brought a body of oncology social work practice into the formulation of the study focus, as well as the questions asked and the data analysis (Myrdal, 1967). For the author, a practicing oncology social worker and administrator, the lived experiences of

the participants in this study have resonated deeply, sometimes with pain and sometimes with insight and joy, as the researcher was both an investigator in this study and brought to the study the professional experience of being an 'insider' in the very world being researched (Jorgenson, 1989).

Fifty-seven out of the sixty-seven oncology social workers initially contacted participated in this study. Almost all of the study participants expressed curiosity about the subject of this study and their interest in a fellow oncology social worker's research as the motivating factors for their participation. Many were not sure that they would have much to contribute to the study, but their desire to help, their curiosity, their institution's sanction to participate, the anonymity and the opportunity to talk about their work for a half-hour with a fellow oncology social worker prevailed.

## **Results**

The majority of the participants in this study are female (89%), married (68%) and white (95%). The age range is twenty-five years old to sixty-four years with over half (54%) forty years of age and older. The majority (85%) had five years or more post MSW experience. The majority (70%) had been oncology social workers for five years or more and 51% had worked at their current institution for five years or more. The data suggests a population which is relatively stable and experienced in oncology social work. These clinicians valued their work life autonomy, their helping role with the oncology population, their making a difference in the lives of patients and caregivers, and the transformative nature of their work. Using the voices and stories of the study participants, the study documented the experience of being an oncology social worker, their commitment, energy, their challenges, fears of failure and what prompted their innovations. The study yielded a systematic understanding of the process of innovation, including the risks, supports, barriers, obstacles and benefits of innovation; and participant recommendations for internal organizational structures, which encourage innovation. In addition, an unanticipated discovery was the emergence of a typology of innovators: The Reactor, who innovates in response to situational/client need; The Academic, who innovates in response to new learning/training and workload applicability; and The Initiator, who innovates in response to an inner drive, their own personal philosophy and need to try new things. Many respondents noted the tragic and crisis nature of the work as stimuli to try something new in an effort to ameliorate the situation. Out of despair, some practitioners were moved to innovate. This unanticipated discovery of a typology of innovators merits further study and exploration, since it is not documented in the literature.

Participants identified three areas of focus as recommendations to foster innovative practice in oncology social work: administrative and supervisory underpinning of support; staff development and continuing education; and time set aside to think and reflect about the work and its existential impact. Leadership of the department, including a culture to develop staff, was seen as impacting staff's potential to innovate. The need for top management commitment to innovation was echoed by the study participants as critical.

## **Utility for Social Work Practice**

The findings have implications for supervisors and administrators in oncology social work, as well as schools of social work. The study suggests that the nature of oncology social work, which deals with life threatening, chronic illness and existential despair, serves as a catalyst to mobilize some practitioners to innovate to find new ways to meet the needs of cancer patients and their families. In some instances, innovative practice serves as an antidote to the stressful nature of the work. These topics would provide fruitful areas for future research.

Although the findings must be approached with some caution due to the limited sample size and sampling methods employed, the study identifies the role of the culture of the setting in promoting and inhibiting innovation in oncology social work. The study implies that training programs for middle managers and administrators in oncology social work need to be developed to foster the growth of work cultures which promote innovation. This study identifies an important area for future research. Given the changing needs of cancer patients and the fast paced technologic advances in the treatment of cancer, it is the innovative social work staff, department, institution and schools of social work that will be able to meet the needs of oncology patients, survivors, their families, caregivers and healthcare professionals. Although the study is specific to oncology social work, the findings may be viewed as applicable to social workers in other settings.

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